

Research Design and Methods – Research Development Project

The Problem

With the advent of the Pennsylvania Core State Standards, Keystone Exams tied to graduation, student test scores accounting for ever-growing portions of a teacher's evaluation, and an emphasis on rigor in the classroom, educators are feeling tremendous pressure to foster meaningful growth. Meanwhile, there remain significant communication gaps between schools and families (not to mention within schools and within families) related to what it takes to be academically successful today.

Parent-teacher conferences have long been the tradition across the nation at the elementary school level, and they have generally been just that: a meeting between parents and teachers. That same process, in some form, continues in many middle and high schools as well, though many conferences at the secondary level occur only when there is concern regarding behavior or academic progress. In either case, the key stakeholder – the student charged with learning and performing – is often left on the outside looking in (sometimes literally).

As stated in *Student Led Conferences: Students Taking Responsibility*, a 2010 research paper written by Sherri A. Nauss and submitted to Southern Wesleyan University,

“One of the many challenges that face middle grade students, parents, and teachers is the student's lack of ownership of their academic achievements. Teachers and parents speak on a regular basis through emails, phone calls, and conferences regarding the current grades of the students. Parents and teachers discuss the student's attitude toward the work, the student's work ethic in the classroom, the student's ability to perform on assessments, formal and informal, and the student's ability to manage their responsibilities. Through the sharing of all of this information, the student is either not present during the conference or talked about, as opposed to talked to, during the conference. Through this process of conferencing, the teachers and parents enable the student to take a back seat in their academic success.”

The research paper can be found in its entirety here:

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED516784.pdf>

The pressure to highlight and sometimes prove growth in a parent-teacher conference falls almost entirely on the teacher. Parents are left to piece together what they have heard from their children and what they have heard from the teachers, which can often contradict one another.

This phenomenon is not unique to education in the United States. Schools in New Zealand, for example, have recently begun to tackle the issue of connecting their system with their families (more specifically, extended Maori family groups called whanau). Jennifer

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Charteris of the University of Kaikato and Rebecca Trafford of Tiniroro School wrote the following in *Speaking Plainly: Student Led Reporting in Relation to the New Zealand Curriculum Standards*, an article found in a 2010 issue of *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*:

"The learner should be at the heart of the assessment process. By inquiring into their own achievement data students can develop an understanding of where to go next with their learning and how to get there. They own it."

The authors of the piece went on to say:

"Leaving children out of assessment practice reflects a system which focuses on doing *to* more than doing *with*. Although teachers and parents/whanau may think they are doing for their child they are really positioning him or her as a passive non-participant."

The article can be found in its entirety here:

http://www.teacherswork.ac.nz/journal/volume7_issue1/charteris.pdf

Considering up to 50% of a Pennsylvania teacher's evaluation is soon to come from student growth (derived from performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and reported through the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System) and local achievement data (building assessments and measures determined at the district level), test scores have never been more impactful on an educator's livelihood.

Personally, I am uncomfortable with only half of my evaluation coming from administrators who observe my practice and professionalism on a day-in, day-out basis while the other half comes from student test scores. Anyone who has set foot in a classroom will understand that there are countless factors that go into test performance, and while there is value in this measure of growth, it is highly concerning that lawmakers continue to make it the primary tool to gauge teacher effectiveness.

Looking to take charge of the situation rather than admire the problem, I am turning to a practice I had heard about in passing from a former colleague. The study I plan to conduct over the next two years seeks to investigate whether student-directed conferences can bridge the communication gap, increase student accountability in terms of personal growth compared to the standards, and ease the transition for all parties (teachers, students, and parents) from the "legacy" or old state standards with the Pennsylvania Core State Standards. My intention is to use this information to address how conferences are conducted within my grade level team and in my building, extend those findings across the district, and raise awareness for other educators of a practice many have found to be exceptionally rewarding and successful.

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The Questions

- (A) Do student directed conferences lead to a clearer understanding of what the state academic standards entail for families than current practice?
- (B) Do student-directed conferences provide families with better information regarding where their children stand as they progress towards the standards compared to typical parent-teacher conferences and traditional percentage-based report cards?
- (C) Do student-directed conferences lead to greater student accountability for their own learning and behavior?

Hypotheses for Question A:

Very few parents can currently name particular standards expected of their children – parents who are teachers included. Students encounter the information more frequently, but their grasp of what they must know in fourth grade remains relatively vague. With the implementation of student-directed conferences, all parties will engage in more frequent conversations about what they know and what they will need to know.

Hypotheses for Question B:

Parents and students who experience student-directed conferences will have a deeper understanding of what is expected academically of fourth graders. As a result, they will better recognize where they are compared to where they need to be. Many will appreciate the innovative approach to conferencing and will therefore be more inclined to buy-in as true members of a team.

Hypothesis for Question C:

Students who participate in student-directed conferences will be more likely to attend to oft ignored tasks such as basic math fact practice, independent reading, and journal writing. Homework completion will be more frequent, there will be fewer behavioral concerns, and students will take classroom assignments more seriously – connecting each activity to their own learning rather than asking “Is this going to be a grade?”

*Additional Hypothesis:

Parents with a history of negative interactions with the school may opt to maintain their power through standard parent-teacher conferences, leaving children out of the loop and keeping responsibility for learning almost entirely on teacher. This is quite possible.

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The Method

Informally, I have already interviewed each of my 26 families (7 of which include parents who are public school educators – 3 elementary, 4 secondary). I shared my intention to look into student-led conferences, explained my rationale for considering the practice, and asked if that would be something they would be interested in, if given the opportunity. All families showed an interest in learning more about the process, and several remarked that it would be an excellent experience for their children. Given just twenty minutes per conference, some parents wondered if there would be enough time to fully conference with everyone within the typical timeframe. Others were curious how more sensitive topics would be discussed (we agreed those types of conferences would be held as needed in a more traditional format at the discretion of the families and teachers involved). All agreed they would appreciate a clearer picture of what the standards are and where their children stand in comparison. At present, report cards share a single percentage grade for Math, Science, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies – a message that in no way conveys strengths or weaknesses in terms of the academic standards.

To further test the waters, I have also informally interviewed my new principal, my grade level partners, and the building Reading Specialist, all of whom provided positive feedback and expressed the sentiment that it will take a great deal of work but that it will should yield the results I am seeking. Feeling supported to explore further, I have reached out to our former Math Coach (now an Instructional coach elsewhere in my school district) who used student-led conferences when she was a classroom teacher – she readily agreed to join me in the endeavor, and she is seeking permission from her building principal to find time in the instructional day to help me prepare an effective portfolio model. Through Twitter, I have used crowd-sourcing to connect with those who have used or at least tinkered with the idea of student-directed conferences at the elementary level. Finally, I have informally interviewed my students about how they would feel about joining the conversation at conference time. Some really liked the idea while others were unsure whether they would be comfortable talking with their parents in a formal setting.

At the start of the 2014-15 school year, I will put out a baseline survey asking questions about expectations and desired outcomes from the November conference sessions. This appreciative inquiry should turn up valuable feedback that can be used in planning each conference (regardless of the format). Surveys will also include questions intended to determine the amount of background knowledge families have regarding the Pennsylvania Core State Standards. To get the most possible feedback/participation, I will ask my grade level partners to distribute the survey to their parents as well, which should reach a large and varied segment of the school population. In looking at enrollment projections, roughly 25% of families in our school will have a child in fourth grade next year.

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At Back to School Night, I will share my interest in exploring student-directed conferences and share my vision for how they would be organized. Following the BTSN session, I will create a link on my class website dedicated to conferences, providing the structure, rationale, relevant links, and responses to frequently asked questions. My current website can be found here:

<http://rogersroom42.weebly.com>

All students will begin the year by developing a portfolio that will contain work to show learning towards Pennsylvania standards in Math, Science, Social Studies, and ELA. It will be organized using child-friendly I-can statements. Students will assist in selecting artifacts - formative and summative assessments, projects, other classroom activities - that will be shared. Performance in all areas (achievement compared to the standards, effort, neatness, completion, etc.) will be required components of each portfolio. Each portfolio will also contain a section for SMART Goals and a draft for a plan to achieve learning targets. This process alone should help familiarize students with the standards more than current practice, and while it may mask whether or not student-led conferences are the reason for positive results compared to my hypotheses, I am willing to accept some uncertainty as long as the end result is good for kids. All students deserve a chance to celebrate their successes and acknowledge their needs.

To pilot the conference format in November, I will initially choose ten families, purposefully selecting students functioning at various levels across the curriculum. Families will have the option to opt out of student-directed conferences at any time (though I will encourage a commitment either way within three weeks of conference time for preparation purposes). Those who opt out will still benefit from student portfolios, but I will be discussing the contents instead of the student.

One week prior to entering a conference – student-led or not – parents and students will be asked to complete a survey seeking to ascertain comfort and knowledge of what the Pennsylvania Core State Standards require, how their classroom performance compares to those standards, a reflection of study / work habits at home and in school, and general feedback.

As a follow up, a second survey will be provided at the end of each conference for the students and another for the parents to reflect on the positive outcomes as compared to a student-free conference or suggestions for future conferences. Data collected will come in the form of numerical information (example: On a scale of 1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, and 4-Strongly Agree, respond to the following – I have a clear understanding of learning targets and standards as a result of my conference). Qualitative data will also be collected in the form of response to open-ended constructed feedback fields / appreciative inquiry.

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The same 10 families will be invited to participate in another student-directed conference during the second session (late winter / early spring). The same questionnaires will be utilized. With success and reflection, my hope is to open the process up to 5 additional students in the second session with an eye towards full implementation in the 2015-16 school year.

The same process will be utilized through the 2015-16 school year, and my hope is that at least one (if not all) of my grade level partners will join me in the endeavor.

The Data

My intention is to connect all of the data collected from my surveys and interviews – quantitative and qualitative – in a manner that will reflect the successes and shortcomings of student-directed conferences through the first two years of implementation. Reports in this area already exist and they will serve as a guide in my organization and sharing of information. The Education Review Office of New Zealand published one such report in June of 2010 to share findings of (among other things) student-led conferences and the impact on Maori family involvement.

<http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Promoting-Success-for-Maori-Students-Schools-Progress-June-2010/Findings/Engaging-Maori-students-and-communities/How-did-effective-primary-schools-engage-Maori-students-and-communities>

As I mentioned earlier, there will be challenges in determining whether or not student-directed conferences were entirely responsible for student accountability. Every child, family, and experience will be unique, and the conferences will not occur in isolation. My classroom practices will be geared towards student growth and understanding of the new standards regardless of conference format. Our new English Language Arts curriculum and a new Math curriculum on the horizon are likely to incorporate elements that will assist families in understanding what is expected to show student academic growth. Realistically, conferences are just one small piece of the communication and learning process, but I am confident the information gleaned from interviews, surveys, and observation of student behaviors / study skills will support my stated hypotheses.

Any findings will be shared initially with my principal and grade level team first. Next, I hope to extend the information to my building (and to share it with my network of educator friends through social media). Depending on how well received my work is, I hope to share my work across the district through in-service, through webinars / education conferences, and through continued graduate work with Thom Stecher and Associates.

Conclusion

Ideally, I would love for each child in my classroom to be able to answer the following

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question(s) posed in the appendix of Amanda Ripley's The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way (2013): "What are you doing right now? Why?"

Student-directed conferences are but one cog in the big machine, but research already exists to suggest that they can be powerful and effective. As stated above, should my local results be positive, I intend to share this work and offer support to others interested in taking on the practice. At the building level, I am seeking to assert myself more as a leader, having new-found support in the form of a new principal, and I get the sense that I will have the opportunity to mentor and model for others in my school more frequently.

For those seeking to replicate this study, I would strongly recommend reviewing available literature and interviewing colleagues who may have already had experience in student-directed conferences. The process is time and labor-intensive, but it does not require the reinvention of the wheel. Several frameworks and resources already exist – a simple Google search will turn up hundreds of school sites and educational groups who can provide materials and structure to follow. Books on the subject are also available, such as Implementing Student-Led Conferences by Jane M. Bailey (2001) and Student-Led Parent-Conferences by Linda Pierce-Picciotto (1997).

I would also suggest conducting the study over a number of years, encouraging as many grade level partners to participate as possible as well. This will allow the team to gather the maximum amount of feedback and connect with a wider variety of students and families. Should the study be too narrow, it may turn out that the sample was comprised of families already likely to buy-in to a team approach and familiarize themselves with the academic standards.

Finally, I would recommend that anyone trying this method for conferencing take care to start small rather than jumping fully into a new format altogether. Work out the kinks through a gradual implementation and reflection rather than hitting an overwhelming wall and risking the possibility of abandoning the practice entirely.

If students and teachers are going to be held accountable for academic performance, regardless of the measure, families (children included) and schools need to communicate openly about specific learning goals and performance. Student-directed conferences provide an opportunity and structure for such dialogue, and I am hopeful that the efforts will both be well-received and, most importantly, impactful in terms of student engagement and learning.